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MEMOIR OF HON. DAVID OLMSTED.

BY J. F. W.

Some considerable time has elapsed since the death of the subject of this sketch, and it might appear that the Historical Society is culpably tardy in doing this justice to his memory. But the delay has arisen solely from inability to procure the material requisite to prepare a memoir complete enough to be worthy of the subject. His career subsequent to his arrival in Minnesota was, of course, quite well known to the old settlers, and could have been easily written up; but the portion particularly needed was the events of his early life, before settling in this State. The writer has been in quest of these for several years, but until very recently has been unable to secure sufficiently full and accurate particulars of Mr. OLMSTED's younger days, to warrant the publication of a memoir. From his brother, PAGE OLMSTED, Esq., of Monona, Iowa, and from other sources, the writer has at length secured data and facts that enables him to place on record in these Collections, a brief, but it is thought, correct memoir of one of the best and purest public men connected with the history of Minnesota—regretting only that the task had not fallen to one more competent.

DAVID OLMSTED was born in Fairfax, Franklin county, Vermont, May 5th, 1822. His father, TIMOTHY OLMSTED, was descended from some of the earliest Puritan colonists of Connecticut. In May, 1824, the residence of the family was completely destroyed by fire, with most of its contents. This was a serious misfortune for Mr. OLMSTED's family, as their means were limited, and it was only by some years of hard labor and strict economy that the loss was made good. It was an event

that closely affected the subject of this memoir, as it deprived him in a considerable degree of the education which he would otherwise have had, and he was able to obtain but a limited amount of school tuition. He had a mind active and quick, however, and made good use of such opportunities as he had, while the loss of schooling was in a great measure compensated by other advantages. His mother was a woman of unusual intelligence and discretion, and to her home training he was doubtless indebted more than to any other source, for the knowledge he acquired during his boyhood.

In the spring of 1838, at the age of 16, he left home with the approbation of his parents, his sole means consisting of $20 in money, to seek his fortune in the great West. By stopping occasionally to work when his means were exhausted, he reached Chicago in about a month. From Chicago he went to Mineral Point, Wisconsin, where he entered the employ of a Mr. LATHROP who was keeping a hotel. During the fall of that year the hotel was burned in the night, and OLMSTED with several other inmates, narrowly escaped by jumping from the window of an upper story, losing all their effects.

Late in the fall of that year, young OLMSTED went to Grant county, Wisconsin, where he entered 40 acres of Government land, lying on Grant river, about six miles north of Potosi. Here he lived for some months in the rude style of the mining region, keeping "bachelors hall" with a friend named WILLIS ST. JOHN. In the fall of 1839 his brother PAGE visited him, and chanced to find him very ill with bilious fever, the region at that time being very sickly. After his recovery, the OLMSTED brothers went to Prairie du Chien, and remained there for several months.

In July, 1840, they started on foot on an exploring tour through the then unsettled portion of northern Iowa, on the waters of Turkey and Yellow Rivers, looking for a desirable place to settle. Their outfit consisted of a blanket and gun for each, and as much provisions as they felt able to carry. They spent about two weeks in examining the country, traveling over a considerable distance. They finally selected a spot about thirteen miles west of the Mississippi River, now named Monona, where, without a team or other help, they erected a

comfortable log cabin. At this time there were but very few white settlers nearer than Prairie du Chien, on the east, and none whatever on the west of their location. The Winnebago Indians then possessed the country in the immediate vicinity north and west of the claim selected by the young pioneers, and the OLMSTEDS found it to their advantage to occasionally traffic with them, and consequently learned considerable of their character, customs and language—a fact which was probably the cause of DAVID OLMSTED becoming subsequently connected with the Indian trade on a large scale.

Less than one year after making their settlement, the OLMSTED brothers disposed of their joint claim, and each took a new one in the same neighborhood. Up to this time the Winnebagoes had been their only neighbors west and north, and but one white settler east or south nearer than seven miles; yet by treating the Indians with perfect fairness they had won their confidence, and only on one occasion did the Indians show any signs of enmity. This was about November, 1840, when seven young Indians came to the cabin occupied by the brothers, about sunset, and made threats to burn the cabin. The OLMSTEDS at once bolted the door of their cabin, when the Indians commenced trying to break it down. Fortunately at this juncture Mr. HARMAN SNYDER, who had been for several years employed as government blacksmith among the Winnebagoes, came along, and being influential with the tribe, and speaking their language perfectly, he persuaded them to desist from their attack. Had he not done so, probably the OLMSTEDS would have been murdered. This is but an instance of the dangers and risks to which all who lived in the Indian country in those days were subjected. When in liquor the savages would, perhaps, attack their best friend. The same trait was exhibited frequently by the Sioux. Dr. WILLIAMSON, an influential missionary to the Sioux at Kaposia, respected and beloved by them, was frequently compelled to barricade his house, to save his life from the drunken attacks of those who, when sober, were his warm friends and supporters.

DAVID OLMSTED continued improving his farm during the next three years, when, in the fall of 1844, being now twenty-

two years of age, he sold his claim to good advantage, and embarked in the Indian trade, near Fort Atkinson, Iowa, as clerk for W. G. and G. W. EWING, licensed traders to the Winnebagoes. In the fall of 1845, Mr. OLMSTED was elected from the District in which he lived (Clayton county), as a member of the Convention to frame a Constitution for a State Government in Iowa. The Convention assembled in May, 1846, at Iowa City. It consisted of thirty-three members. On May 18th the instrument was completed and signed by the members, and being adopted by the people, gave birth to the great and flourishing State of Iowa. We might mention as a fact, showing the primitive modes of traveling in Iowa, at that day, that a prominent citizen of Minnesota, [Hon. L. B. HODGES,] saw OLMSTED on his way to the Convention, *riding a bare-backed mule, with a rope halter.* Mr. H. further states that so youthful was the appearance of young OLMSTED when he was elected, that many of his constituents thought he was not of age, but said they "would send him anyhow," as he was so much esteemed.

In the fall of 1847, Mr. OLMSTED, in company with H. C. RHODES, purchased the interest of the EWINGS in the Winnebago trade, and in the summer of 1848, when the Indians were removed to Long Prairie, Minn., he accompanied them.

The Winnebagoes had, in October, 1846, made, at Washington City, a Treaty, by the terms of which they agreed to abandon their old possessions in the soon-to-be State of Iowa, and remove to a new reservation procured for them in the Chippewa country, in the year 1848. But when the time for their removal arrived, they seemed very reluctant to go, and it required all the diplomacy and influence of Gen. J. E. FLETCHER,[1] their agent, accompanied by the presence of U. S. troops from Fort Atkinson, with the threat of coercion, to

1 JONATHAN EMERSON FLETCHER was born at Thetford, Vt., 1806. He removed to Ohio when a young man, but afterwards settled at Muscatine, Iowa, in 1838, and went to farming. In 1846 he was appointed by Prest. Polk agent for the Winnebagoes, and remained in that position for 11 years. During this period he resided at Fort Atkinson, Iowa, Long Prairie, and Blue Earth, Minn. He returned to his farm at Muscatine in 1858, and died April 6, 1872. He left a wife and eight children, several of whom were born in Minnesota. A memoir of him in the Muscatine Journal says: 'He was a man of marked and noted character—a man of talent, energy and industry, actuated at all times by truth, right and justice."

induce the savages to start. At Wabasha Prairie (now Winona) they made another stand, and having purchased that spot from WABASHA, the Dakota chief, seemed determined to resist to bloodshed any attempt to move them a step farther. The situation was now critical. The first drop of blood hastily spilled would have led to a bitter war.[1] An express was dispatched to Fort Snelling for more troops, which soon arrived under command of Capt. SETH EASTMAN. This, with the dragoons from Fort Atkinson, a company of volunteers from Crawford county, Wis., and two pieces of artillery, made quite a formidable force. The Winnebagoes began to reconsider their first hasty resolves, and the defection of a part of their number under an influential chief, added to the arguments and persuasion of Mr. OLMSTED, Hon. HENRY M. RICE, GEORGE CULVER, and others who were present, finally convinced them that resistance would be unwise and ruinous, and they proceeded on their journey. The value of the services that Mr. OLMSTED rendered in quieting the revolt can hardly be overestimated. Perhaps no man living had more influence with the tribe than he. They trusted him implicitly. Had he given any encouragement to their rebellious conduct, or said one word to urge them on, a long and bloody war with the tribe would have desolated the frontier.

On arriving at Long Prairie, Mr. OLMSTED, with his partner, established a trading post which was continued for several years.

Soon after settling here, Mr. O. met with an adventure which well illustrates the dangers and casualties to which the pioneers of a new country are exposed. Believing that the road, or trail, from Long Prairie to Sauk Rapids (which was very circuitous) could be shortened by a new route, he started on horseback in company with an old Frenchman named DECHOQUETTE to survey and mark out a new route. At that time the region was a perfect wilderness; no surveys had been made, and NICOLLET's map was the only one they had. This was really of no use to them, and after proceeding some distance they became involved in a labyrinth of tamarac swamps,

1 Gen. SIBLEY says in his Reminiscences that "the Winnebagoes were regarded as among the most turbulent and dangerous of the North Western savages."

marshes, sloughs and jungles, until, at the end of the second day, they were utterly lost, and had not the faintest idea of where they were, or how to retrace their way. They now turned their horses loose, and endeavored to pick their way out, but without success. They floundered about in the swamps for seven days longer, wet, torn by briers until they were almost naked, and suffering the pangs of hunger. During this time all the food they had was a morsel of meat, and two sunfish caught in a stream. They finally reached Sauk river, where a friend who had gone in search of them providentially found them, more dead than alive. During the last two days of their wanderings, DECHOQUETTE's sufferings had driven him partially insane, and when they were found, neither could walk. Mr. OLMSTED's naturally strong constitution was very seriously impaired by the sufferings and hardship of this adventure. It was some time before his strength was measurably restored, and there is no doubt that it was the main cause of his early death at the age of 39, when he should have been in the prime of life.

The Territory of Minnesota was created March 3d, 1849. On July 7th, Gov. RAMSEY issued a Proclamation dividing the Territory into Council Districts, and ordering an election for members of the Legislature, on August 7th. Mr. OLMSTED was elected a member [for two years] of the Council from the Sixth District, which was constituted as follows: "The Sauk Rapids and Crow Wing Precincts of the county of St. Croix, and all the settlements west of the Mississippi, and on and north of a due west line from the head waters of said river to the northern line of the Territory." In the absence of any surveys or well known natural lines, this was the only way in which such a district could be described. The Legislature assembled on September 3d, and Mr. OLMSTED was chosen President of the Council. The next session of the Legislature was not held until January, 1851. It is unnecessary to add that Mr. OLMSTED took a prominent part in both sessions. His fellow-members and the public soon came to respect and esteem him as an honorable and reliable man, and a faithful public officer. His good sense, well-balanced judgment and practical views on all subjects that came up gained him much influence, and though

modest and even taciturn, not thrusting himself forward incautiously, many selected him as one worthy of a higher position—indeed, one for which he was soon named.

In 1851, Mr. OLMSTED married a Miss STEVENS, daughter of Judge STEVENS, of St. Albans, Vt., by whom he had a son and daughter, both now residents of Minnesota.

Soon after this, finding that the profits of the Indian trade were becoming so small as not to justify remaining in it any longer, he disposed of his interest in it, and removed to St. Paul, where he not long afterwards purchased of Col. D. A. ROBERTSON, proprietor of the *Minnesota Democrat*, the newspaper establishment known by that name. Mr. OLMSTED became proprietor on June 29, 1853, and remained publisher of the same until September 2, 1854. Without having much, if any, experience as a writer for the press, prior to his assuming the editorial chair, he nevertheless had good success in that capacity. His clear, logical mode of thought, mature judgment and practical common-sense views of every subject, gave his plain, terse writing a force and influence that many more polished writers could not have commanded. The paper largely extended its influence and circulation under his control, and was changed to a daily in May, 1854. In September, 1854, he sold out to the late CHARLES L. EMERSON, on account of his failing health. His connection with the *Democrat* had made him widely known and popular with the people of the Territory.

In the spring of 1854, Saint Paul having been incorporated as a city, Mr. OLMSTED was elected its first Mayor, a position which he held for one year.

In 1855 Mr. OLMSTED removed to Winona, then a village of a few houses, and devoted his energies to building up that now flourishing city.

During the summer of 1855, Mr. OLMSTED was brought prominently before the people of this Territory as a candidate for Delegate to Congress. On July 25, the first regular Republican convention was held in Minnesota, and Hon. WM. R. MARSHALL nominated for Delegate. The same day, the Democratic convention met, and nominated Hon. HENRY M. RICE. During the proceedings, a portion of the delegates

objecting to the tenor of certain resolutions passed, withdrew, and forming a new organization, placed Mr. OLMSTED in the field. Thus there was a sort of "triangular" contest, three candidates, each with a leading journal advocating his claims, and a party of earnest friends supporting him. Many of the readers of this paper will remember the warmth of the contest. But they will fail, I think, to remember that during the entire campaign DAVID OLMSTED either said or did anything unfair or dishonest, or allowed his friends to do so, to aid his cause. The wing of the party which placed him in the field, however, was too feeble in strength to give him any chance of success, and Mr. OLMSTED really received the smallest vote of the three candidates, though he came out of the contest with popularity unimpaired and honor untarnished.

In the fall of 1856, Mr. OLMSTED's health began to decline quite rapidly, and he was advised to spend the winter in Cuba, which he did, but it failed to check the progress of the disease which was consuming him. His strong constitution and tenacity of will resisted the rapid inroad of the destroyer somewhat, but he felt that the end could not be far off. He therefore returned to Minnesota, and after visiting his relatives at Monona, Iowa, and Winona, came to St. Paul to see his friends here. It was his last visit, and was taken advantage of by them to secure the portrait which now hangs in the City Hall. In October he returned to his old home in Franklin Co., Vermont, to remain at his mother's house until the final summons should come. He was soon after reduced so low as to be unable to leave the house, and indeed much of the time confined to his bed. Even in this stage, though suffering great physical pain and debility, he wrote frequently to his friends here. His letters dated during this period breathe an air of resignation and even cheerfulness, but evidently conceal a sadness when speaking of his wish to see his old friends in Minnesota once more.

Death came to his relief after months of suffering, on Feb. 2, 1861. The news was received with sincere regret by his friends in Minnesota, and the press paid generous and warm tributes to his worth and integrity. Saint Paul Lodge No. 2, I. O. O. F., and Ancient Landmark Lodge No. 5, F. A. M., of

which he was a valued member, passed heartfelt resolutions of regret, and the "Old Settlers Association" of Minnesota at their next annual reunion, placed on their records an appropriate eulogy. On the map of our State his name is well bestowed on one of our most flourishing and populous counties.

Perhaps I can do no better, to show the estimation in which he was held, than to quote some of the tributes paid to his memory by those who knew him most intimately. One of his friends thus truthfully sketched his character in a communication to the St. Paul *Pioneer:*

"DAVID OLMSTED had a mind of peculiar order. His leading characteristics were firm integrity, honesty of purpose, adhesion to friends, charity for opponents, a retentive memory, good common sense, and sound judgment. He was brave, but never rash; and was as modest as brave. No man ever saw him excited. Grateful for favors, he would rather grant than receive them. Originally a Democrat, then a conservative Republican, firm in his own principles, always respecting the views of others, he was never a partisan, but always a patriot. Often absorbed in deep thought, even to absent-mindedness, and without a polished address, he nevertheless won the hearts of all by his kind, straightforward and manly conduct."

A clergyman who attended him in his last illness, writes: "He died in the faith of CHRIST, and in communion with his church. He died in peace." Another clergyman, who knew him intimately, writes: "A loftier disdain, as stern and calm as it was lofty, of the *base* in character, I have seldom seen in any man, nor a warmer appreciation of simple honesty and singleness of heart in others."

Capt. SAM. WHITING, (then of Winona) paid the following touching elegiac tribute to his friend:

Vermont! thy green hills shroud in gloom,
Thy noblest son has met his doom;
Pass'd, in his manhood's pride and bloom,
Away from earth;
Let us, 'round OLMSTED'S early tomb,
Recall his worth.

In Minnesota's earliest year
He sought her hills, a pioneer,
Full of ambition—void of fear
And wily plan:
One such as high and low revere—
An honest man.

Well may thy stroke, O Death, appal,
When thus earth's best and worthiest fall,
Unterrified he heard thy call,
And sank to rest.
His spirit soars above the pall,
Among the blest.

Revered and loved while here on earth,
Thou man of pure and sterling worth,—
Though lone and cold thy homestead hearth,
Though from us torn,
Our loss is but thy blissful birth
To endless morn.

OLMSTED! thou'rt sleeping with the dead,
Yet o'er thy low and grassy bed,
The sweetest rose shall rear its head,
To deck thy tomb;
And on each sighing zephyr shed
Its rich perfume.

Thy burial spot is hallowed ground,
And oft thy friends shall gather round,
Their joy subdued—their grief profound,
As each shall tell,
His virtues, who, beneath the mound,
Is sleeping well.

Yes, DAVID OLMSTED! though the sighs
Of friends bereaved for thee may rise,
Thy soul, beyond yon radiant skies,
Has reached that shore,
Where all of human sorrow dies
For evermore.

Such is an imperfect sketch of one whose name must always be honorably associated with the history of Minnesota. Mr. OLMSTED was a self-made man. Starting in life a poor boy, unaided by friends, with but little of the education bestowed by schools, he was literally "the architect of his own fortune." Settling on the frontier, among a rude population, in a region almost a wilderness, with nothing but energy and industry, guided by unswerving principle and honor, he pushed his way to reputation and friends, to position, and—in some degree—to wealth. He had some peculiar traits of character which

tended to gain for him that popularity which he enjoyed to such an enviable degree. He was emphatically a man of the people. Without seeming to court the good will of others, he had a quiet, natural suavity of manner that insensibly attracted men to him, and made even the humblest citizen in his presence feel himself a friend. There was something winning in the kindly tones of his voice, and the cordial clasp of his hand, and one felt impressed with its sincerity. And it *was* sincere. No man had more strongly the feeling of Fraternity than DAVID OLMSTED.

These traits, added to his exemplary character, his ability, and untarnished honor, made him beloved by his friends and respected and esteemed by all brought into contact with him, as perhaps no public man in our State has been, before or since. Even in times of the warmest political excitement, (and the rancor of territorial politics can scarcely be appreciated by our recent settlers,) he escaped detraction and slander. Or if not entirely, twenty years have now almost obliterated the animosities and differences that separated men into hostile parties in those days, so that all will now forget the resentments of the past and unite with me in laying a wreath upon the grave of one, on whose monument History, with impartial hand, must carve the tribute—"a good and true man."

St. Paul, March, 1874.

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